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Australian Journalism Studies after 'Journalism': Breaking down the disciplinary boundaries (for good)

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that if journalism is to remain a relevant and dynamic academic discipline, it must urgently reconsider the constrained, heavily-policed boundaries traditionally placed around it (particularly in Australia). A simple way of achieving this is to redefine its primary object of study: away from specific, rigid, professional inputs, towards an ever-growing range of media outputs. Such a shift may allow the discipline to freely re-assess its pedagogical and epistemological relationships to contemporary newsmaking practices (or, the 'new' news).

> If anyone has taken serious notice of the democratising potential of popular and postmodern forms of journalism, it seems to be those pests from cultural studies rather than journalism educators themselves. The latter are holding the line between modernism (truth and power) and postmodernism (fantasy and identity). (Hartley, 1999a: 28)

It is fair to say that journalism has long tried to defend itself from incursions by 'outsiders' (see Deuze, 2005). Its defence has often come in the form of 'boundary maintenance' (Bishop, 2004: 31) to exclude potential newcomers from being seen as 'proper' journalists. Indeed, the amount of intellectual wrangling in recent years over who is, and who is not, 'a journalist' this age of digital access (see, for instance, 'Who Is a Journalist?,' 2008) shows just how important such segregation is to the discipline. Just as we were entering the democratisation moment of the mid-2000s, where 'citizen' journalism was starting to break down longstanding professional boundaries between professionals and amateurs (to the excitement of many), one Australian academic called publicly for a licensing system of some sort to be introduced. 'After all,' he thought, 'doctors and lawyers need certification to prowl someone's biological or legal innards. Anyone, in contrast, can declare

themselves a journalist' (Conley, 2006). Such vehement protectionism is indicative of how journalism has quite consistently responded to change and upheaval by further entrenching its existing position and redoubling attempts to exclude potential competitors – even if that is rather like trying to turn back the ocean tide with a teaspoon.

Like those professional boundary maintenance efforts, many[1] Australian journalism scholars have also undertaken to protect themselves from competition for their intellectual territory as well (Hartley, 1999a). Anything looking remotely like a new bridge or overhanging tree is typically seen as a potential avenue of attack and cause for, if not all-out panic (see Lumby, 1999), a spirited defence of its ontological garrison. These tensions were baldly exposed during the 'media wars' of the mid- to late-1990s (see Flew and Sternberg, 1999; Turner, 2000), which essentially arose from a desire among some journalism scholars to annexe the 'intellectual' from the 'instrumental' (Hartley, 1999a: 23), analysis from production, and an understanding of the 'cultural/textual form' from the study of the 'professional/industrial institution' (p. 25). Although the fierce debate over those divides (presented quite simplistically as 'cultural studies versus journalism') died down many years ago, it only ever descended into a cold war; one fought quietly between those (modernist, journalists) who see journalism as a rarefied collection of tacit, embodied knowledge to be 'passed down' to future journalists, and those (mostly postmodern, 'media studies' folk) that wish to theorise and understand it as a cultural practice like any other. One Australian Journalism Professor, Alan Knight, *still* desperately tries to attack prominent theorists such as John Hartley (whom he, astoundingly, calls an 'anti-journalist'), principally because he has apparently 'bizarre theories about what journalists do' that are rarely 'questioned by journalists who have actually done it' (Knight, 2010). For Alan Knight then, like many others, the best way to police journalism's (rather narrow) intellectual domain – to 'hold the line' in Hartley's words that opened this article – is to sharply divide everyone into one of two camps: those proper journalism 'insiders' who have *actually done it*, and those 'outsiders' that haven't. The former are to be respected for their experience, and the latter dismissed for their ignorance.[2]

Journalism	Cultural/Media
Practice	Study
Application	Theory
'We'	'They'
Vocational	Critical
Production	Consumption
'Us'	'Them'
Creation	Use
Instrumental	Intellectual
Modern	Postmodern
Power	Identity
Truth	Perception/Experience
Professional	Academic
Empirical	Hypothetical
Concrete	Abstract
A Posteriori	*A Priori*
'Insiders'	'Outsiders'

Table 1: The disciplinary divides of journalism in the academy

I would argue, however, that this 'culture of exceptionalism' and 'preciousness' (Turner, 2011: 6, 7) is actually doing great damage. Erecting high walls around the discipline will, in the long-run, only stifle journalism as a discipline, not fortify it. Innovation – which is vital to journalism's ongoing public value (see Harrington, 2012a) – rarely, if ever, comes from the centre; it invariably comes from the *outside*. Like most other forms of public culture, the evolution (that is, improvement[3]) of journalism practice will occur, and thrive, without any regard whatsoever for 'rules' or the views of the establishment (both inside and outside the academy), let alone intellectual boundary maintenance. Should journalism academics choose to live inside a disciplinary fortress and focuses their energies on excluding 'outsiders', the discipline will become – or remain – stagnant, completely blind to the rapid evolution of journalism practice occurring even slightly outside of its existing purview, disconnected from the research into this innovation, and ever more marginalised among the academic community. To put it very bluntly – at the risk of further mixing militaristic and biological metaphors – if it cannot adapt fast enough, journalism in the Australian academy will share the fate of the dinosaurs.

So, if Australian journalism studies wishes to remain dynamic, flexible and relevant, and not one day obsessing over a mere historical curiosity, then these unnecessary and divisive barriers must be broken down from the inside—out.

Beyond 'Journalism'...

Well over a decade ago, Hartley (2000) noted that there was a significant shift taking place in the media sphere, from a 'representative' system in which a very small group in society (i.e. journalists) acted on behalf of citizens – who were otherwise disenfranchised in the 'communicative democracy' – to a 'more direct' system, where all citizens have the right (and, more importantly, the *opportunity*) to themselves communicate to those in power. He observed that:

> In this context the journalist 'reports to' a privatized, virtualized public whose demands, however, can be expressed directly, in person. A consequence of this altered relationship is that the sense- or sensation-seeking public sets the agenda, not the journalist. And what counts as journalism extends ever further into non-canonical areas, until 'journalism' is dissolved. In other words, even as its representative democratic function is superseded, journalism itself massively expands. The expansion of journalism is taking place technologically as it develops on-line, and generically as it migrates into areas beyond news journalism, including sport, lifestyles, fashion, travel, and 'popular' forms. (Hartley, 2000: 44-45)

In other words, journalists' position as the exclusive mediators between power and the citizenry would be eroded by the proliferation of new communication technologies, and any residual 'representative' function would be undertaken by an ever-wider range of media texts. Because of this, 'developments in journalism studies should not be looked for from among journalists themselves' (Hartley, 2000: 40).

Looking at them in hindsight, these words seem not 'bizarre' (Knight, 2010), but prophetic, particularly because one of the biggest trends in political discourse in recent years, at least on television, has been the 'addition of talk... [by] those who position themselves *outside* the conventional wisdom and sense-making of political elites' (Jones, 2010a: 44, emphasis added).

In his much-celebrated book *Griftopia*, American author Matt Taibbi recalls the mainstream media's response to his 2009 feature on Goldman Sachs ('The Great American Bubble Machine') in which he famously called that investment bank 'a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money'. After that article was first published he was, perhaps not unsurprisingly, quickly drawn into a war that was partly to do with class politics, and partly to do with his transgression of business journalism's professional 'turf'. Because he is not a journalist in any traditional sense – his highly polemical and

expletive-ridden article was published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, not a newspaper – and had no experience in the financial or corporate worlds, the reaction was like, he says, 'a bunch of insiders angrily piling on someone who didn't have any background in their area of expertise (which I did not)' (Taibbi, 2010: 207). Making the reaction even worse, however, was the fact that his article, which laid bare Goldman's history of reckless greed, was also 'not-so-subtly indicting [business journalists] for falling asleep on the job' (ibid.). Taibbi has since become one of the most powerful writers on the after-effects of the global financial crisis, the banking system that helped create it, and may also have played a large role in stirring up the 'Occupy' movement now drawing attention to income inequality in the western world.

Staying in America, the person that has done the best job of exposing and critiquing that country's absurd new campaign finance laws is not a journalist, but Stephen Colbert. Through his 'Super PAC' – 'Americans for a better tomorrow, tomorrow' – he uses the system itself to show how corrupt and easy-manipulated the system is by those who have the financial means:

> Two years after the Supreme Court voided many of the country's bedrock campaign finance laws, much of the American public is still confused by the change – and stupefied by the often-impenetrable jargon that frequently encumbers any discussion of the topic.
>
> But one public figure has managed to pierce the veil of dullness to actually demonstrate – in an electrifying way – just how dangerous and corrupt the current system of political campaign financing has become.
>
> In an indication of the desperate state of campaign finance laws – and the mainstream media – that person is a comedian: Stephen Colbert, who plays a right-wing blowhard on the Comedy Central show "The Colbert Report."
>
> Colbert has spent much of the past year on a crusade to accept unlimited contributions from corporations, unions and individuals in order to make political statements and lavish himself with luxuries. In so doing, he may have helped bring the troubling issues surrounding campaign finance to the public's attention more than either the reform community or traditional media. (Blumenthal and Froomkin, 2012)

Geoffrey Baym (2010) argues that cases like Colbert should not just merely be seen as useful additions to the political public sphere, but as experiments in *journalism*, because they often 'come far closer to the idea of critical publicity that theorists have long suggested democracy demands' than 'real news' today does (Baym, 2010: 101-102; c.f. Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011).

It would be easy to continue listing examples like these, but Taibbi and Colbert alone help greatly to reveal a fundamental characteristic of the 'new' news: that it is, as Turner (1996: 88) described, 'a "post-journalism" production culture'. Some of the most powerful and significant new approaches to journalism are not arising out of traditional institutional settings, but from 'outsiders' who lack formal training, and who those in the academy would not even recognise or accept as journalists. If, however, journalism is viewed as the process of disseminating relevant, well-researched information to the public sphere – or, a 'process of creating and distributing non-fiction drama, of giving shape and structure to raw information' (Meikle, in this issue) – then there are many texts and genres across the media sphere that now perform this task without attention to the well-established methods advocated by most journalism educators. That some of the most powerful, well-respected newsmakers around the globe actually achieve their goals principally because they don't just ignore but *actively reject* the journalism orthodoxy (Jones, 2010b; Harrington, 2012b) shows we are at a critical juncture.

... To 'news'?

Many journalism academics now find themselves in a problematic position, where their rigid conceptions of what journalism is do not accurately reflect the reality of how the full panoply of 'news' works within our culture. To remedy this scenario, the discipline might be wise to radically re-consider its primary object of study, and shift the emphasis of disciplinary knowledge away from what is broadly understood as *journalism* – which can continue to be seen as a specific professional input which produces a rather narrow range of very 'formal' outcomes – towards *news* as a broader description of the informational output from a widening array of (many 'informal') texts and producers. We could not, and should not, dispense with the term journalism, but we ought to view it instead as a particular mode of production or ideology, rather than a textual descriptor. It should therefore be seen as a news-making process, defined by particular 'repertoires of conduct' (Meadows, 1999: 46); a specific professional orientation that values things like objectivity, 'official' sources, verification of raw information (Simons, 2012: 203), and codes of ethics – all of those things which help to endow what it produces with greater authority and legitimacy in the eyes of its audience – but which can no longer make blanket claims about an innately superiority ability to inform the public.

At the same time, this would also necessitate a significant re-definition of the term *news* – not as a specific textual format (audiovisual programming with globally-shared generic codes), but as

information that is *new*. The problem, as John Corner (1995: 54) once recognised, is that '"The News" [genre]… [is] perceived as so closely related to the events themselves as to not warrant separate identification.' If we instead look at 'news as a form of cultural discourse, rather than information' (Dahlgren, 1988: 289), then our conception of it must extend far beyond mere genre. So, in a sense, what is required here is a conceptual disconnection of the thing that we call 'news' (how the term is used in everyday vernacular) from the TV Genre with which it has become synonymous over so many decades. 'News' should then be defined by effect rather than means. In short, by its intended or likely *function*, rather than its specific *form*. Such a change would allow us to stop valorising anything that merely follows journalistic textual styles (that is, the 'label'), and look instead at the quality and socio-cultural value of the *product*. That is, to think 'less about who (or what) is producing the information', and whether or not they're a journalist *per se*, 'and think more in terms of the ends that may/may not be achieved as a result' (Harrington, 2008b: 278).

A 'new' journalism studies

In this paper I have argued that, to date, journalism studies (particularly in Australia) has not done a particularly good job of understanding the many changes to the news media system that have occurred in recent years, due largely to the boundaries the discipline insists on placing around itself, which are blinding it to innovative practice. I therefore argue that scholars should re-focus their energies away from a narrowly defined professional inputs (i.e. 'journalism'), towards *news* however, and wherever, it might present itself.

I am aware that this is a simple, radical and deliberately provocative suggestion (boundary maintenance is always undertaken to with the aim of preserving power), but journalism – a discipline based, at least in principle, on a modernist ethos that seeks to *resist* power and authority – is nothing if it is wholly adverse to provocations and mildly radical ideas. My argument should be viewed, at best, as a friendly attempt by an admiring outsider to assist the development of Australian journalism studies, or, at the very least, a simple warning that a large portion of the extant academic discourse of 'journalism' in Australia no longer corresponds with the reality of the new informational culture that, in this issue of *Media International Australia*, has been loosely termed as 'The "New" News'.

Apart from the previously stated argument that journalism studies needs to remain flexible and adaptive if it is to remain a relevant and healthy, I would argue that there are two potential benefits of shifting its object of study: one pedagogical, the other epistemological.

The pedagogical benefit relates to how journalism is taught in the academy. To emphasise and teach the 'occupational ideology' (Hartley, 2000: 40) merely entrenches the 'rules' and symbolism of the craft, and therefore forces journalism students to pull on what Dahlgren (1992: 18) once called a 'confining skin of official discourses', thus hindering the profession's evolution. If journalism educators more freely acknowledge that journalism's many conventions 'are not governed by immutable rules of biology or physics or other mandates of nature' and are 'only tangentially governed by the laws of man' (Merritt, 1998: 17), then students and future practitioners might be encouraged to think more creatively about how their practice might circumvent the limitations imposed by these conventions (see, for instance, Baym, 2005; Feldman, 2007). This may inspire more innovation, rather than imitation, because the focus is on the *outcome*, not a rote imitation of the input that once (almost exclusively) achieved it. The profession will therefore be, to use a term, 'future-proofed' (Harrington, 2008a).

The other upshot is that it would effectively liberate us from so many of those tiresome debates around who really 'knows' journalism, and has the *authority* to properly critique it. As was implied earlier in this article, a common feature of journalism scholars in Australia is their insistence on *a posteriori* knowledge as a requisite qualification for a proper understanding of the craft. That is, the legitimate study of journalism requires intimate, first-hand experience of journalism practice, hence the commonly-held belief[4] that journalism is 'best theorized by journalists (as opposed to theorists)' (Hartley, 1999b: 228). Focussing, however, on outputs, rather than inputs, shifts the disciplinary focus from production/producer, to consumption/audience. This completely flattens the epistemological hierarchy that journalism has used to reject 'outsiders', because all citizens have an *a posteriori* understanding of news, and experiential knowledge of how it actually works. Everybody has 'done it', the disciplinary moat is bridged, and we would all, in this case, become an 'insider'. Australian journalism academics will hopefully then realise that there's not much point in erecting a barrier of any sort if everyone is already on your side of it.

Notes

[1] My use here of the word 'many' – not 'all' – is deliberate, as I do not believe that this characterisation of insecurity fits the great number of Australian journalism scholars who are very collegial, innovative thinkers, and whose work I deeply respect.

[2] I would argue that this premise is much like a politician claiming that only current or former politicians (and not journalists) can properly critique their work.

[3] I am aware that in reality, and contrary to popular belief, the process of evolution does not necessarily result in unidirectional improvement and ever-greater biological complexity (for an accessible discussion, see, in order, the books *Wonderful Life* and *Full House* by Stephen Jay Gould), but 'evolution' is used here in a metaphorical, rather than scientific, sense.

[4] For example, at the June 2012 launch of his edited book *Australian Journalism Today*, Professor Matthew Ricketson echoed these sentiments (although in a very positive, collegial tone), by saying that former practitioners have a distinct advantage, because they 'understand journalism *from the inside*; they know its rhythms and its vagaries; they're fond of the peculiar culture of newsrooms and believe in the democratic value of journalism done well'. Although, if this is true, it should also be noted that ex-journalists themselves have generally not exploited that advantage in terms of traditional academic outcomes (Bromley and Neal, 2011).

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